

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1A

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Fake officer conned us, embarrassed Army says

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DOTHAN, Ala. — The strange tale of Alan Goetsch fairly percolates with allusions to murky contacts and dangerous jungle missions into the very heart of darkness. And, as in any good spy story, with people who are not who they seem to be.

Suddenly, as the mysterious Army captain tells it, his secret operation into Central America was terminated. Goetsch was arrested by the FBI, discarded by the CIA, disavowed by the USA. In from the cold. Into the slammer.

But, in this spy story, it's Capt. Goetsch who isn't quite who he seems to be.

He's not a captain. Not in the Army.

A federal grand jury will hear charges May 7 that Goetsch — now in jail and no longer talking — spent a month running around

the Fort Rucker military base in southeast Alabama. He was, according to the Army, "impersonating a military officer," faking credentials, checking out Army trucks, making unauthorized parachute jumps, collecting undeserved salutes and embarrassing the U.S. Army.

Goetsch had flashed his home-made military credentials, or his forged "top secret" orders or his fake commendation from the Central Intelligence Agency — and convinced a number of officials that he was setting up a jungle hospital in Central America, ostensibly for the Miskito Indians but really to support the anti-Communist contra guerrilla operations. This, of course, at the behest of the CIA.

Somehow, Goetsch made it believable.

"That's Alan," says George Ames, with a chuckle. "He's slicker than hair on a frog."

Ames, undersheriff of Sweetgrass County in rural Montana, has accumulated a six-inch file on Alan Goetsch, an ingenious impostor.

"He conned the hell out of me," admitted retired Air Force general Harry Aderholt, of Fort Walton Beach. Aderholt is president of the Air Commando Association, which really is involved in providing medical care for the Miskito Indians in Central America. "It cost me \$2,000."

"Alan always tries to move a little too fast," says Bill Goetsch, out \$12,000 himself on one of his brother's projects. "His ideas get out ahead of reality."

Alan Everett Goetsch Jr., 34, born in Red Bluff, Calif., the oldest of four sons, grew up in California and Oregon, never finished high school. But his brother says Goetsch is "two points off genius."

"I'd have to go along with that," a California policeman said.

Recollections differ

Goetsch has often claimed that he was in the Army from 1969 to 1979, a Green Beret who served first in Vietnam and in a number of exotic secret missions since. The Army says no, that Goetsch served from May 1970 to May 1972, his adventures limited to that of a supply sergeant stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

But when Goetsch showed up in Colusa, Calif., in 1982, he was deep into his Green Beret persona. "He came in talking with this big plan to put in a helicopter ambulance service. He talked about having backing from Kuwait and all kinds of stuff," said Colusa County Sheriff Bob Watters.

Goetsch got offices and hangar space from the county board of supervisors, and an estimated \$400,000 from local investors. But the project never got beyond a single ambulance, which was re-

possessed before Goetsch fled Colusa.

Goetsch headed up to Big Timber, Mont. "He came in here and overnight he was talking about this big para-rescue operation," Ames said. "He had everybody here believing him. He was slick. He could sell a sunlamp to an Arab."

'It was weird'

Meanwhile, Ames said, "Captain" Goetsch, as he insisted on being called, was operating out of a ranch near town where he, his brothers and several other men were "running around in fatigues with automatic weapons. It was weird."

Ames arrested Goetsch in December 1983 on charges of writing \$12,000 worth of bad checks and making false statements to obtain a bank loan.

Ames also searched Goetsch's ranch house, where he found computers, a special printing machine, and a stack of various identification papers, commendations and college diplomas he apparently had printed.

Goetsch posted \$1,000 bond, ignored provisions that he remain in Montana and went off to Dothan, Ala., hometown of his second wife, Faye, and not far from Fort Rucker.

After some effort, Ames managed to get Goetsch back to Montana. He pleaded guilty, was given five years' probation and allowed to return to Alabama,

where Goetsch was doing some undercover work as an informant in drug cases for the Alabama Bureau of Investigation.

"People were calling me from down there in Alabama and telling me to lay off Goetsch," Ames said. "He had them believing in him."

Suburban move

About a year ago, Goetsch, his wife and 11-year-old stepson moved into a roomy brick ranch-style home in a shaded, comfortable Dothan subdivision. Sometime in mid-March, he showed up at nearby Fort Rucker.

"We know he had a military ID and that he had orders attaching him to Fort Rucker," said Lt. Col. Lawrence Retta, the base public affairs officer. "We know that he made two parachute jumps. One here and another at Fort Benning."

Continued

Goetsch brought two other men from California into his odd operation: Peter C. Grevie, a real estate agent from Colusa, and Jeff Was- sel, from Alameda. The trio ate at the Army mess and drove Army trucks. About the time the scheme unraveled, Goetsch was trying to obtain military housing on the base for himself and Grevie.

Grevie and Wassel now say they, too, were taken in by Goetsch, believing that he had actually been re-activated in the Army and that they were part of this secret CIA operation in Cen- tral America. Neither was charged.

At one point, Goetsch drove an Army truck to Atlanta to ask the Atlanta-Fulton County Emergency Management Agency to donate some surplus medical supplies to his phantom hospital.

'A fine figure'

"He was very persuasive. He looked like a captain to me. As a matter of fact, he cut a very fine figure as a soldier," said Director

Delmar Corbin, a retired Army colonel.

Goetsch, with his good looks, dark hair and military bearing, similarly fooled Gen. Aderholt in Fort Walton. He came to Aderholt with a plan to set up a hospital and with promises of major financial backing. Aderholt gave Goetsch about \$2,000 to arrange the deal. "I guess I just wanted to believe him," Aderholt said.

Aderholt said it was a retired sergeant in his organization who asked the FBI to investigate this supposed captain. Goetsch was arrested on April 10. No bond was set. He's still in jail in Dothan.

But from his cell and through his Dothan lawyer, Goetsch has fash- ioned his elaborate story involving the Army, the CIA and some shadowy figures in Central Ameri- ca and the United States.

His lawyer, Jerry Herring, has a stack of documents and some handwritten notes about meeting with government officials and strange taxi drivers in Guatemala. In Goetsch's home, investigators found two computers, maps of Central America and a paper shredder.

"If Al's not telling the truth, what's going on here?" asked Herring. "How can the Army explain this?"

CIA spokesman Cathy Pherson said the intelligence agency, as a matter of policy, does not confirm or deny agent identities.

If investigators are sure that Goetsch is lying, no one seems quite sure why. There are sugges- tions that his elaborate masquer- ade gave him a sense of power or importance. "He wanted to be a big man in the CIA," one said.

His brother Bill, now confused himself about his brother's mili- tary service, said, "I don't know what to think."

"Something has just gone hay- wire. Maybe Al just played the game well enough to blow past everybody."



Alan Goetsch: 'Slicker than hair on a frog.'